

# NI Bulletin

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New world, new coins. Our entry for this issue discusses coins minted for French colonies of the West Indies.

It was our hope to include our auction catalogue with this issue, hence its brevity. That has been postponed until the next issue with the result that it will be relatively small as well.

As usual, please send articles and other material you might want to share with your fellow members.

Joseph Uphoff  
Editor

## Fleur-de-lis Douzains of the West Indies

David Wolfer NI#2793

The douzain (sol of 12 denier) was the first French billon coinage to reach the New World. It was also the first billon coin to receive the moniker *sou marqué*. Breen writes,

Immense quantities were struck for North American circulation. The first were the Paris Mint's counterstamps of 1640: Earlier billon pieces, some dating back to the Middle Ages, were recalled and countermarked with a fleur de lis in beaded oval- the first Sous Marques.<sup>i</sup>



**Fig. 1. French douzain with fleur-de-lis countermark, commonly referred to as the sou marqué by French inhabitants.**

Much in the way of pertinent information on the douzain can be referenced from Robert Vlack's book *An Illustrated Catalogue of the French Billon Coinage in the Americas*.<sup>ii</sup> Major Pridmore also provides a condensed study of these countermarked coins and their role within West Indian numismatics.<sup>iii</sup> Some redundancies in both

Vlack and Pridmore's data can be expected within the following discussion.

Douzains were rated at 12 deniers in France. This was raised to 15 deniers in 1640, with the increased value indicated by an additional application of a fleur-de-lis countermark (Fig. 1). They were then sent to French colonial possessions in the New World where the coins fluctuated in value at enhanced rates. It is likely the ready acceptance of low-grade silver currencies in North America and the French Antilles was greatly aided by the early settler's familiarity with a French billon coinage that their forefathers had handled for generations. Thus, the douzain can be viewed as an important precursor to a number of low-denomination French colonial billon and copper issues that were destined to follow its lead.

Prior to the arrival of douzains in the New World, the use of billon as a monetary metal already had a long history of acceptance throughout Europe. Derived from copper alloyed with lower percentages of silver, it filled a crucial niche in the European marketplace by providing a medium of exchange that straddled the gap between payments requiring coinage of good quality silver and those of base copper.

French billon contained 24% silver prior to and including 1641, reduced to 19.95% thereafter. Douzains officially weighed 2.39 grams through 1641 but this was reduced to 1.85 grams under Louis XIV. Provincial mints are known to have taken liberties with these specifications in their production, particularly as it relates to the percentages of silver, or lack thereof, they chose to add to the alloy.

**Douzain Specifics: Introduced in the reign of Charles VIII (1483-1498)**

Billon douzain- Sol of 12 deniers

24% Silver Content through 1641

Official Weight: 2.390 grams

Diameter: 25mm

## **Reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715): Reintroduced by Edict of October 1692**

Billon douzain- Sol of 15 deniers

19.95% Silver Content

Official Weight: 1.85 grams

Diameter: 22-25mm

Note: This issue was struck on new planchets, overstruck on old billon douzains, and overstruck on old billon douzains displaying the fleur-de-lis countermark.

## **French denominations and their valuations.**

3 copper Denier equals 1 copper Liard

4 copper Liards equals 1 billon Sol (12 Deniers)

**1 billon Douzain of 15 Sols**

20 billon Sols equals 1 silver Livre

6 silver Livres (120 Sols) equals 1 silver Ecu

4 silver Ecus equals 1 gold Louis d'or

For the most part, England was disinclined to include a billon coinage within its monetary system; instead providing the marketplace with smaller, light-weight silver coins of high fineness in lower denominations. Economists have argued that this approach to monetary policy- the maintaining of high intrinsic value currencies -was a key reason for the English rise to dominance on the world stage during the early modern period of European history. The veracity of that claim continues to fuel scholarly debate to this day; however, the practical application of this policy in the homeland and throughout British colonial possessions during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries forced inhabitants to struggle with a constant scarcity of small change in daily life, since the production of small British silver coinage never seemed to meet the demands of the marketplace.<sup>iv</sup>

France, on the other hand, had no problem providing billon coinage to its constituents, but often found itself adjusting monetary policy around weaknesses inherent in the use of the alloy. Primitive mint technologies available at the time produced a hammered coin that lacked security edge milling and created irregularly shaped flans exhibiting smooth areas often lacking a complete replication of the obverse or reverse die. When entered into circulation, unscrupulous individuals quickly went to work on the new coin's edge with files and snips, removing bits and pieces of the original coin while leaving behind lighter weight specimens that the public soon learned to distrust. A money that the crown wished to circulate at a calculated value (tale) was reduced to trading by weight and eventually gained the perception of "bad money" within the population (Fig. 2). This caused silver currencies of higher intrinsic value to trade at a premium in the markets or disappear from the money supply altogether, due to hoarding.



**Fig. 2. Countermarked douzain displaying wear, inconsistencies in strike, disfigurement from the punch and the inherent brittleness of the billon alloy.**

In towns and villages throughout the kingdom, "bad money" would invariably be offered up initially for purchases as both merchants and customers pursued personal strategies intent on returning the billon coins back into circulation as quickly as possible while setting aside the better silver pieces for a rainy day. An unintended

yet inevitable consequence of this practice was the increased velocity of circulation the billon coinage endured, adding the additional element of wear to a currency already discounted due to its lightweight condition.

A distinct characteristic of billon separates it from the other nobler alloys and became another negative factor confronting monetary officials. In today's environment of fiat coinage, value is implied by the perceived financial strength of the issuing authority. Back in the day when coinage was backed by its actual precious metal content, populations expected real intrinsic value to reside in each and every coin and recognized the importance of keeping their fingers on the pulse of locally traded currencies. This was often due to debasement of the monetary stock by the crown. Over the course of time, a savvy merchant class learned to maintain the services of skilled assayers to check for the ever-present possibility of intrinsic devaluation. These specialists were adept at discovering discrepancies in precious metal content through various testing procedures. When assayers applied standard tests to billon coins, however, the presence of base metals interfered with their ability to accurately assess quality. Billon didn't ring true, nor was its variable color a good indicator of its precious metal content to the naked eye.

As one would expect, if a coin appears false to a merchant, it is not going to be readily accepted in trade. Also, when the capability exists to quickly verify a coin's intrinsic temperament in the marketplace, individuals holding counterfeit coins experience a greater risk of exposure and the attention of authorities. However, if a particular alloy, by its very nature, is inherently difficult to assess, as was the case with the douzain, counterfeiters would find little reason to fear any consequential liability. Inevitably, douzains were heavily counterfeited, adding further to the taint of "bad money" already associated with their use.



Therefore, the billon douzains and comparable billon coinages produced by other European nations presented the following problems: 1) they were prone to clipping and filing because of crude minting practices, 2) they wore quickly due to accelerated circulation and the softness of the alloy, 3) these conditions led to underweight coins circulating next to counterfeits, which proliferated because of the inability to determine authenticity based upon weight, size or intrinsic content, 4) the combined effect of legitimate and spurious coins circulating together inevitably led to poor control of the money supply by authorities, resulting in unanticipated bouts of inflation.

French finance ministers battled constantly to mitigate the inflationary effects that resulted from the use of billon as a monetary metal. It is easy to see how a coinage deemed so problematic within the metropolitan environment would become a blessing in disguise when shipped to colonial possessions. In the colonies, there existed such a desperate need for small change that any coinage laced with a perception of value would have been readily accepted. Furthermore, because merchants were reluctant to accept billon in payment for imported goods, its presence in local commerce did not impact mercantilist interests by running the risk of returning home. For these reasons, it took little time for French countermarked billon coinage to settle comfortably into the commercial fabric of colonial life. Settlers quickly embraced the douzain and its new fleur-de-lis countermark, even when forced to adjust to the enhanced values it eventually traded at in these new territories.

Early evidence exists as to the presence of French billon coinage in the West Indies. In *A History of Currencies in the British Colonies*, Robert Chalmers references a letter to the Antigua & Leeward Isles Board of Trade and Plantations, dated July 13, 1691 by the British Governor Christopher Codrington: "... and ye least we have now is a French Sole mark, which passes here for three-halfpence, yet is six of them to a Rial." The only French 'Sole

mark' authorized to trade in French colonies in 1691 would have been the countermarked douzain.

In a footnote to the above-mentioned letter, Chalmers is unable to pinpoint the specific French coin being described by Governor Codrington: 'Apparently the French colonial coin of 5 sols, or perhaps the *Double*, struck in 1670.' In spite of the lack of attribution, he goes on to describe an Act in 1694, passed by the General Assembly of the Leeward Islands, which includes a table with valuations of gold and silver coinage current in trade among the islanders (*A Table for Money intended to pass by this Act*). At the bottom of the column for silver money is listed: *Black Dogg or French Sous marks @ 1-1/2d*. A portion of Chalmers footnote to this table reads as follows:

In connection with these "Black Dogs" the following extract from the Antigua Act of 1757 regulating the Assize of Bread is of interest: ... "The loaf of wheaten bread commonly called the *Dog loaf or three-halfpenny loaf*, and which is the sixth part in value of the silver pieces of money, now usually current in this island by the name of the Bit, or 9d, shall weigh, after being baked, 16-3/4 oz. av." On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1825 the "Dog Loaf" in St. Kitts was to weigh only 8 oz. av.) In Connecticut, in 1721, "An Act sent from the Lower House that the coin called Black Doggs pass at 2d p. pce. [per piece- author] was dissented to." (Crosby, "Early Coins of America" Boston 1878, page 203). Crosby could "gain no clue as to what coins were here referred to."<sup>vi</sup>

There is no question that the "Black Dogg" or "French Sou mark", the local moniker confounding both Chalmers and Crosby in this anecdotal snapshot, was the countermarked billon douzain. Chalmers' verification of the douzain's acceptance by British colonists from locations in the West Indies clear up along the

eastern seaboard of North America depicts a coinage offering widespread appeal to a populace in dire need of small change.

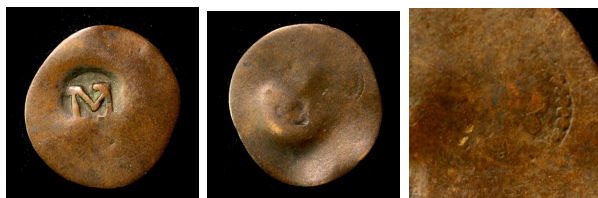
Today, by visually identifying the fleur-de-lis countermark found deeply punched into the surface of well-worn douzains, numismatists can track this extraordinary migration from French metropolitan use in the 16<sup>th</sup> century all the way to Caribbean black dogs further stamped by other local island countermarks around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These relics offer irrefutable evidence of the regional circulation of douzains in the West Indies for over half a century after other billon coinages (namely, the 1738-64 double sou of 24 deniers, the stampees of 1763-79 and the ubiquitous Cayenne 2 sous of 1782-89) had been produced in France to replace the old workhorse.

With our first example (Fig. 3), both surfaces of an old douzain has been worn smooth, except for remnants of a deeply embossed fleur-de-lis countermark observable on one side of the coin and another partial stylized 'M' countermark from Montserrat, attributable to the period 1785-1801, found applied to the opposite face.



**Fig. 3. A fleur-de-lis countermark can be identified on one face of this well-worn coin. The opposite side displays an additional local island countermark from Montserrat, circa 1800.**

A second example displays a more complete rendition of the same Montserrat punch along with an almost indiscernible fleur-de-lis stamp (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4. Of the three images showing another Montserrat black dog bearing a better struck 'M', the closeup image reveals a barely perceptible impression of a fleur-de-lis countermark on its reverse.**

A third example from the island of Tobago resides in the ANS Collection, #1925.104.1 under the label, *Billon 1 Stampee, Trinidad and Tobago, 1798*. One edge of a deeply struck fleur-de-lis countermark has caused a crack in the flan large enough to see daylight through. Above the countermark is the local Tobago stamp described as follows, '*TB above annulet...*'. Weight: 1.11, Diameter: 22mm.

We are lucky these rare specimens have survived the ravages of time to inform us of the late stages in the life cycle of a coinage conceived nearly a century and a half earlier and the vibrant island communities that found a benefit in continuing to utilize this distinctive currency in their day-to-day transactions.

## Counterfeits

As with any countermarked coinage of the West Indies, care in identification is required due to the large number of modern forgeries that exist within the series. Overstruck countermarked douzains are no exception.

A coin that surfaced recently in a Jeffrey Bell auction, held May 2-3, 2019 (Lot 534), exhibits what appears to be an authentic fleur-de-lis punch in combination with a contemporary counterfeit Montserrat countermark (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 5. Countermarked douzain with additional ‘M’ punchmark applied, possibly a contemporary counterfeit punch from the island of Montserrat. Jeffrey Bell Auction/Toronto Coin Expo Spring Sale- 2019, Lot #534 Images compliments of Geoffrey Bell Auctions Ltd**

A number of illicit ‘M’ punches have been attributed to Montserrat over the years. Although never blessed with official status, the coins with these unauthorized countermarks circulated freely alongside legitimate examples. If indeed a period punchmark originating from the island, the above coin offers another representative example of the douzain’s extended sojourn to the Caribbean.

A specimen found plated on page 152 in Robert Vlack’s book (#432) is not as convincing, however. Unlike the worn fleur-de-lis countermarks pictured in the previous images, the fleur-de-lis countermark on the Vlack coin presents a level of wear that would

grade ‘very fine’ or better This is our first indication that something might be amiss.

Closer inspection reveals an unlikely scenario. The fleur-de-lis countermark is improbably stamped over the St. Martin punch. This could not occur with an authentic piece since legitimate fleur-de-lis countermarks were struck well before the 1798 issue date of the St. Martin countermark<sup>vii</sup> In fact, both countermarks on the Vlack plate coin, #432, are modern forgeries offering no value to this discussion.

Another one of these spurious St. Martin pieces surfaced in an eBay auction by a French dealer on July 2, 2018. Again, the fake fleur-de-lis punch could be clearly identified residing on top of the false St. Martin stamp. These two modern forgeries prove that care should be taken when considering the authenticity of double-stamped West Indian coins displaying a fleur-de-lis countermark.

### **Closing Thoughts**

A coin worth a loaf of bread in early island markets would have easily covered the cost of a pint or shot of rum in a local seaside tavern. Since the douzain’s circulation in the West Indies coincided with the age of piracy on the Spanish Main, there is every possibility these black dogs were used by the notorious scoundrels to facilitate some small aspect of a lifestyle known for its debauchery and excess. Regardless of the coin’s relative obscurity when compared against the fame and mystique afforded Spanish silver pieces of eight and gold doubloons, the countermarked douzain was undoubtedly an indispensable part of that colorful swashbuckling era.

Even after discounting for the brief flight of fancy above, it is obvious this unpretentious coin served an important purpose for early West Indian inhabitants as they slowly evolved from barter to the use of currencies in their everyday transactions. Thankfully evidence from other indiscriminately applied regional countermarks offers a helpful reminder of the distinctive role the

fleur-de-lis douzain played in the early monetary history of the West Indies.

## Notes

- i Walter Breen. *Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins*, p. 44.
- ii. Vlack, pp. 8-14
- iii. F. Pridmore. *The Coinage of the British Commonwealth of Nations Part oin3-West Indies* pp. 10-11. Spink, 1965.
- iv. Debra Glassman and Angela Radish. *Currency Depreciation in early Modern England and France*. Presented at: The Conference on Monetary and Financial History. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Minn. October 1985. This paper goes into considerable detail regarding the effects of billon as it relates to European monetary policy and local trade from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This document was heavily relied upon for the present discussion.
- v. Sir Robert Chalmers. *A History of Currencies in the British Colonies*, p. 65, Loindon, 1893.
- vi. Chalmers. p. 67
- vii. See C. Scholten, *The Coins of the Dutch Overseas Territories: 1601-1948*. Scholten #1419, p. 170, Amsterdam, 1953. Aldo Krause, *Standard Catalog of World Coins*, St. Martin KM#1.

**Member Notice**

As you may know by now, this summer we lost Carl Young, who had served as our Auctions Manager for a number of years. This sad event has set back preparations for the 98th NI Mail Bid Sale, but they are proceeding. We confidently expect to have the catalog prepared to mail out with the January–February 2020 Bulletin. Other than the delay, the sale will be conducted in the manner, and under the terms and conditions, you have come to expect ; but, since we may need to make minor changes of procedure, please be careful to examine this section of the catalog when you receive it, to help us handle your bids, payment, and lots expeditiously.

Yours for good numismatics,

C.D. Carson, Secretary, Numismatics International